

Bush, South Korean Leader Discuss Bilateral Ties, North Korea

(White House Report) (1520)

13 December 2002

President Bush and South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung spoke by telephone December 13 about United States-South Korean relations and developments in North Korea, Fleischer told reporters.

Bush "conveyed his deep personal sadness and regret over the deaths of two South Korean girls who were accidentally killed during a training exercise by a U.S. military vehicle, and he pledged to work closely with South Korean government officials to prevent such accidents in the future," Fleischer said.

The accident took place in June, and in November a U.S. court martial acquitted the soldiers driving the armored vehicle, leading to widespread protests against the United States in South Korea.

President Kim "said that the South Korean people appreciate the important role played by the United States service personnel in maintaining the peace and security on the Korean peninsula. And he reiterated that the current circumstances make the U.S.-Korean alliance more important than ever," Fleischer said.

Regarding North Korea and its weapons program, President Kim "emphasized that North Korea statements on unfreezing its nuclear program are unacceptable," Fleischer said. "The two leaders agreed to continue seeking a peaceful resolution" of that situation, "while not allowing business as usual to continue with North Korea," Fleischer said.

The phone call between Kim and Bush came the day after North Korea said it would restart a small nuclear reactor and resume building two larger reactors shut down under the 1994 Agreed Framework.

U.S. officials say reactors can be used to build atomic bombs. North Korean officials say they are for generating electricity needed now since the U.S.-led Korean Peninsula Development Organization (KEDO) last month suspended oil shipments to North Korea following North Korea's admission in early October of having a secret uranium-enrichment program.

Fleischer said President Bush "will not engage in allowing North Korea to violate its agreements and then have the world come rushing to North Korea to say, 'How can we help you?'"

"The president wants to work with the international community and our allies in a peaceful way, and through diplomacy, to help the North Koreans to recognize that their best future, and the best way they have to feed their own people and to advance as one of the world's most backward economies, in which the people of North Korea have suffered mightily, is to join the international and the world community so they can have a way forward," Fleischer said.

In a related development, he said the Bush administration views "as a serious matter" North Korea's recent actions in requesting that the International Atomic Energy Administration (IAEA) remove the cameras and seals that had been put in place by the international community to keep an eye on some of North Korea's programs.

"And we hope that North Korea will reconsider their request to the international community to remove this equipment," Fleischer said. "But I want to reiterate that we will continue to work with the international community to seek a peaceful resolution to the situation in North Korea. And this is a situation that North Korea has created by pursuing a nuclear weapons program."

Asked why U.S. policy toward North Korea is different than its policy toward Iraq, Fleischer responded:

"Because the situation in Iraq involves somebody who has used force in the past to attack and invade his neighbors. That is not the history of North Korea for the last 50 years. And so it's not exactly analogous. The world cannot just be treated as a photocopy machine where policies in one part of the

world need to be identically copied for another. It's a much more complicated endeavor than that. And so the president will continue to work in concert with our allies."

BUSH TO TRAVEL TO AFRICA IN JANUARY

President Bush will travel to Africa January 10 to 17 "to continue to build America's partnership with the continent," White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer announced at his midday briefing.

"This visit highlights the Bush administration's commitment toward working toward a free and prosperous Africa. The president also looks forward to opening the second U.S.-Sub-Saharan African Trade and Economic Cooperation Forum in Mauritius," Fleischer said.

The complete itinerary of the president's trip will be announced later.

NO COMMENT ON IRAQI WEAPONS DECLARATION

Asked about news reports -- based on statements by U.N. officials and diplomats with access to Iraq's weapons declaration -- indicating that there are some glaring omissions in the 12,000-page document, Fleischer said "I don't think it would be appropriate for me to comment on these preliminary reports."

The United States, he said, has "always said that we want to carefully review the document in terms of reviewing not only what is in it but what is not in it. That review is still going on."

"Because this is such a serious matter and because the content of what Iraq says in this declaration and what they don't say in this declaration has important implications for war and peace, the United States will take as much [time] as is necessary to do it right. And we will continue to be deliberative and to be thoughtful as we review this document," Fleischer said.

"And while others are free to speak out as they see fit and to give preliminary judgments, the president looks forward to, at the appropriate time, giving a more comprehensive judgment based on all the information, not just the preliminary information," he added.

Asked to comment on discussions between U.S. officials and Hans Blix, the chief U.N. weapons inspector, regarding a provision in U.N. Security Resolution 1441 to permit scientists within Iraq to be debriefed outside of the country, Fleischer said:

"History has shown that one of the most effective ways to judge what Iraq is up to is by talking to the people who are involved in the weapons development programs. And history has also shown that there are Iraqis who want to talk. And that's why the resolution passed by the United Nations includes a provision that facilitates the ability of Iraqis to leave the country with their families to talk to the United Nations so that peace can be kept.

"And this provision was put in there because experience has shown that the Iraqi regime does not want people to talk, and that when they find people who talk, they kill them. And that is why the provision was put in, to allow people and their families to leave Iraq."

"SERIOUS CONCERNS" ABOUT IRAN'S WEAPONS PROGRAM

Asked for the Bush administration's assessment of the newly publicly available satellite photos showing nuclear facilities in two cities in Iran -- Arak and Natanz, Fleischer said, "We have serious concerns about this..."

"The recent disclosure about secure nuclear facilities in Iran reinforces the concerns that the president has had all along. The suspect uranium enrichment plant could be used to produce highly enriched uranium for weapons. The heavy water plant could support a reactor for producing weapons-grade plutonium. And such facilities are

simply not justified by the needs that Iran has for their civilian nuclear program."

"Our assessment, when we look at Iran," he said, "is that there is no economic gain for a country rich in oil and gas, like Iran, to build costly indigenous nuclear fuel cycle facilities. Iran flares off more gas every year than the equivalent power it hoped for -- it hopes to produce with these reactors.

"We understand that the International Atomic Energy Administration is seeking access to these facilities, and we look forward to a report from the director-general, ElBaradei, at the appropriate time as the IAEA takes a look at what's inside Iran."

"So it is a issue that we have highlighted, that the president has made -- brought world attention to -- before, and we do continue to have great concerns about it. It's another reason why it's important to be vigilant in our efforts to fight proliferation of this nature," Fleischer said.

WHITE HOUSE WELCOMES EU'S DECISION ON TURKEY

Asked to give the Bush administration's assessment of the December 13 decision on Turkey at the European Union Summit in Copenhagen, Fleischer responded:

"What has been decided there is that accession negotiations with Turkey will begin in December of 2004 if at that point it is determined that Turkey has fulfilled the so-called Copenhagen criteria on political reform.

"The administration's reaction is that we welcome the EU's decision to begin accession talks with Turkey in December of 2004 upon deciding that Turkey has fulfilled these criteria.

"This is a visionary decision by the European leaders to build a truly inclusive European Union. Turkey's continued evolution toward Europe demonstrates for the continent and for the world that Islam and democracy are fully compatible. The president strongly supports Turkey's continuing commitment to political and economic reform."